

WEB BASED RESOURCES AND TOOLS IN ONLINE LEARNING: A PARTICIPATORY AND COLLABORATIVE METHOD TO ENHANCE READING AND WRITING SKILLS IN THE STUDENTS STUDYING INTERMEDIATE COURSE OF ANDHRA PRADESH AND TELANGANA STATES

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines various reading and writing activities/exercises given in the English textbooks prescribed for the students studying intermediate in the select colleges of the two states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. The paper also reviews the familiarity of students and teachers with the available web based resources and tools that aid in participatory and collaborative online learning process. As part of the study student and teacher questionnaires were administered to I and II year Intermediate students of select private junior colleges. Further, tasks have been designed for reading and writing activities in order to enable the use of digital tools. Later, qualitative data from focus- group interviews was used to analyze the efficacy of digital tools and web based resources in enhancing reading and writing skills. Finally, the paper suggests potential online resources like websites and digital tools for enhancing the reading and writing skills of students that foster the process of teaching/ learning ESL.

Key words: Online learning, digital tools, web based resources, tasks, sub- skills of reading and writing

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1. INTRODUCTION

Today online teaching has become one of the pivotal means of effective teaching learning process. Also, online teaching offers innovative ways of teaching language and associated skills like listening, speaking, reading and writing. This paper focuses on the Intermediate students from select private colleges in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana and their familiarity with digital tools. Further, the study explores the efficacy of web based resources and digital tools in creating interactive, participatory, productive and collaborative online learning environment for the Intermediate students of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. The research questions and objectives that guided the study are as follows:

1.1. Research Questions

- To what extent do writing and reading activities in Intermediate English textbooks motivate the students to learn?
- Does the use of digital tools enable the learners overcome the barriers faced during offline classes?
- Do digital tools foster / enhance writing and reading skills of students?

1.2. Objectives

- To analyze the prescribed writing and reading activities in Intermediate English textbooks as part of the intermediate course structure/curriculum.
- To administer student and teacher questionnaires to analyze their familiarity with digital tools and web based resources
- To analyze the data collected from the questionnaires and design tasks for the use of digital tools.
- To conduct focus- group interviews and analyze the efficacy of digital tools and web based resources in enhancing sub- skills of reading and writing.
- To suggest effective tools to motivate and inspire students to hone their writing and reading skills.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Tim Brosnan (2001) in an article titled “Teaching using ICT” elucidates three important ways in which new technologies influence and change what the students learn. Firstly, Brosnan points out that, new technologies encourage students to understand and interpret information rather than rote memorization. Further, new technologies provide an opportunity for students to interpret and present their ideas to an increased diversity of audiences while simultaneously creating their ‘knowledge worlds.’ However, this leads to a paradigm shift in the roles played by teacher and students. It is neither the teacher nor the learner who play a central role in learning but the emphasis is laid on learning process itself. The teacher only acts as a facilitator in the entire process of learning. Consequently, students tend to become more responsible and

vigilant in choosing/finding authentic information and the onus of learning solely lies on them. Above all, it is not the mere use of technology that is important but the effective and efficient use of technology that enhances LSRW skills of Intermediate students in the context of the present study becomes important.

Be it online learning or face-to-face learning, language learning process is also affected by other psychological factors such as motivation and anxiety. Jelena Mihalijevic Djigunovic (2006) in “Role of Affective Factors in the Development of Productive Skills” identifies trends in motivation research which can be described at three levels- the language level, the learner level and the learning situation level (Dornyer, 1994) (10). The participatory aspect of technology and web based resources could possibly influence factors like motivation and anxiety of second language learning in a positive way. Nevertheless, the use of digital tools in online classes is not bereft of problems. “Creating in a Participatory Culture: Perception of Digital tools among Teachers” by Emily Howell et.al seeks to understand the barriers faced by teachers in creating a participatory digital environment. According to them, students often use digital tools “to seek information but not to create” (139). The study also revealed that barriers like lack of training and equipment are not in the control of teachers. Moreover, from a sociological point of view, teachers’ adaption to technologies may be influenced by personal factors like age, professional experience and expertise in the use of technology for educational purposes.

Use of technology for education purpose should in its true essence be transformational, collaborative and participatory. Nik Peachey, a freelancer, teacher trainer, writer and technology consultant, aptly points out that technology should help students understand how to use it in a way that leads to their self- actualization rather than a form of motivational gimmick (12). The Substitution, Augmentation, Modification, Redefinition model (SAMR) introduced by Dr. Ruben Puentedura in 2006 garnered a lot of followers for its emphasis on the transformational aspect of technology when coupled with learning. It takes technology from being a mere substitute of a course book to an active agent that redefines and creates new tasks or activities in a course book. In other words, technology should help in higher order thinking, as in Bloom’s taxonomy, involving analysis, evaluation and creation of novel ideas.

Interestingly, technology makes collaboration possible not only in terms of how people collaborate but also how it blurs the boundary between learning LSRW skills. This aspect of technology is once again reinforced by Robert Blake in the paper “Technology and the four skills” where he mentions Allen (2003) and Blyth’s (2014) argument that Web 2.0 tools blur the lines between reading and writing as “users can comment or elaborate on someone’s written entries, thereby creating a practice of collaborative reading and writing- what Allen calls wreading.” (135) Hence, the advantages of using technology are manifold ranging from gaining students interest in presenting their ideas and responding to their classmates’ ideas to effective peer feedback and developing independent learning habits (Yunus, M.M., 2013).

3. ANALYSIS OF INTERMEDIATE ENGLISH TEXTBOOKS

The prescribed Intermediate English textbooks (I and II year) contain activities related to listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. However, most of the activities were centered on writing and reading activities. Writing activities for I and II year students include paragraph writing, comparative writing like describing a person or an event in the present and a few years ago, creative writing like weaving a story, technical/ academic writing like note making, report writing, letter writing and diary writing which is informal and personal.

Reading is an important skill in developing second language (L2) competence and also essential in improving interpersonal communication to get along in a globalized society. Moreover, reading is a gateway to the literature and culture of second language (L2). Muriel

Saville-Troike in the book *Introducing Second Language Acquisition* mentions Grabe's list of functions for reading in academic settings in the order of their difficulty for L2 learners:

- Reading for information and includes scanning a text for specific topic or information.
- Reading for general understanding to get main ideas
- Reading to learn, that involves understanding main ideas and storing them in a coherent manner
- Reading to analyze, critique and evaluate (157).

Apart from reading poetry, prose and non- detail lessons prescribed in the syllabus, Intermediate textbooks also have post-lesson reading activities of two types- reading for pleasure and comprehension reading. Reading for pleasure involves reading a poem or a prose excerpt provided at the end of the lesson and as the name suggests reading involves a general understanding to get main ideas. On the other hand, comprehension reading involves reading to elicit answers for questions given in relation to the passage.

4. DATA COLLECTION AND INSTRUMENTS

Two corporate Intermediate Junior colleges, one from each state, were chosen for data collection. Both I and II year students participated in the study along with the English teachers and the respondents were selected randomly based on their interest and consent. The sample size consisted of 25 respondents from each year. Student and teacher questionnaires were administered through Google forms to the selected Intermediate students and Intermediate English teachers respectively.

In this qualitative study, the focus of the questionnaires was to elicit information about students' and teachers' familiarity with digital tools and web- based resources and if they use any digital tools for enhancing reading and writing skills of students. The questionnaires also look at the motivational levels of students in completing reading and writing activities prescribed in Intermediate English textbooks. A detailed analysis of the findings is as follows:

4.1. Analysis of Student Questionnaire

Results evidently have shown lack of interest and motivation in students to take part in the reading and writing activities. Mostly, activities related to writing skills are done as a group activity or through classroom lectures while activities related to reading skills are done in class where the teacher reads the poem/comprehension aloud or students volunteer to read the poem and subsequently answer the questions provided at the end of comprehension. Majority of the student respondents consider lack of creative discussions in class coupled with a monotonous way of doing activities as the primary reason for lack of interest and motivation. Furthermore, English language is perceived as only a mark fetching subject in Intermediate board exams and not a core subject at the Intermediate level. This kind of attitude further attributes to students' resistance towards active participation in reading and writing activities.

4.2. Analysis of Teacher Questionnaire

Evidently, teachers did not use any web based resources or digital tools to enhance teaching-learning experience in classroom due to lack of institutional support and infrastructure. Additionally, some of the issues in online classes include limited access to gadgets, poor internet connectivity, students' learning pace was not considered, lack of time for an interactive question and answer session, and lack of flexible schedules and timings impede the use of digital tools and by extension the learning process.

5. DESIGNING TASKS FOR A READING AND WRITING ACTIVITY

The paper suggests a list of digital tools that can possibly motivate the students to actively participate in doing writing and reading activities. Also, digital tools could be an effective mode to spark motivation and interest in students where learning is pluralized, individualized and experiential. The execution of the suggested web based resources and digital tools involved transforming select reading and writing activities into tasks that enabled the use of digital tools. Rod Ellis in an interview titled “Task-Based Language Learning: An Interview with Rod Ellis” (2009) conducted by Manuel Jiménez Raya draws essential distinctions between an activity and a task. According to Ellis, a task is an activity with some kind of information gap where the primary focus is on meaning (learners are engaged in understanding and producing messages designed to communicate information and opinions). Further, the learners use their linguistic resources, not simply reproduce language given to them, to produce an outcome.

The tasks were divided into a pre- task, during task and post task using Jane Willis, “A flexible framework for task-based learning” (1996). A pre- task introduces students to the activity that may involve brainstorming, new words and phrases, vocabulary and so on.

5.1. Description of Reading Task/Activity

Emily Dickinson’s poem “I’m Nobody! Who are you?” has been chosen as the text for reading and tasks were designed focusing on the sub -skills of reading. In the pre-task, before introducing the poem to students, they were given question to ponder such as,

- Do you enjoy reading poems?
- Name a few poems that you recently read
- Why do you read a poem? Is it for pleasure or aesthetic sense, language, content or ?
- Do you read a poem for main ideas or specific details?
- How many times do you read a poem to understand it?
- Do punctuation marks change the way you read a poem and the meaning?
- Do you pay attention to poetic devices while reading a poem?

Most of these questions were at a basic level of understanding with aim to know students’ perception of reading a poem while laying the ground for while task. All the students were encouraged to contribute their opinions and ideas through mentimeter which in turn forms word cloud of students’ answers to the questions. This ensured active participation of every student in the task. Additionally, the students were made to read the poem aloud with *Microsoft Edge* once and later asked to note down their initial thoughts about the poem any peculiarities in the poem.

The while task focused on skimming for main idea of the poem and scanning for specific details like use of punctuation marks, poetic devices and use of capitalization. After initial reading of the poem, they were introduced to the poem synchronously in Google meet through a digital tool called cue prompter (<https://cueprompter.com/>). This tool enables the teacher/facilitator to put the text on screen in a large font, black and white so that students can comfortably read it while simultaneously controlling the pace at which students read the poem. Since the while task focused on skimming and scanning, the facilitator can move the text faster, if he/she wants students to skim through the poem or can slow down if he/she wants to emphasize specific details. At the linguistic level, it was evident that the students were able to identify difficult words, relate the use of punctuation marks and capitalization in the poem, and identify figures of speech like simile, paradox and how they add meaning to the poem.

5.2. Description of Writing Task/Activity

The following writing activity is prescribed in the English textbooks of Intermediate second year:

Writing activity: “Write a paragraph comparing your routine in the schools two years ago with your routine in junior college now.” A pre-task, during task and post- task have been designed to enable the use of digital tools.

In the pre-task, students were asked to brainstorm the adjectives to describe their routine in school and junior college using *mentimeter* (<https://www.mentimeter.com/>) that creates a word cloud from which words can be picked by students. It was done collectively as a class by encouraging every student to contribute their words/thoughts. The during task involved students working in pairs using *padlet* (<https://padlet.com/>) to jot down the similarities and differences in their daily routines in school and junior college. The emphasis in this stage is on spontaneity, exploring language to communicate their ideas and confidence building. The planning stage of the task cycle prepares the students for the next where students can share the outcome of the task with their peers and teacher. Further, a full- fledged write up was prepared by the students using a creative, visual effective web- based resource called (<https://www.mystorybook.com/>) *MyStory book*. Finally, feedback with respect to content, clarity, cohesion, readability and style of writing can be provided using tools like *Hemingway app* (<https://hemingwayapp.com/>). The post-task involved students to refer to articles that dealt with school and college experiences. Thus, the tasks’ primary focus was to use language along with digital tools to produce information about students’ routine in school and junior college. In the process, attention was given to aspects of writing like clarity of thought and its expression in writing, logical sequencing/structuring of the content, that is, differences and similarities in their daily routine, style of writing and conciseness by avoiding redundant word and prepositional phrases.

5.3. Findings of Focus- Group Interviews

After the preliminary analysis of the responses from questionnaires, the above mentioned tasks have been designed for chosen writing and reading activities and administered through online classes to see the efficacy of digital tools and web based resources in doing these tasks.

Informal interactions and focus group interviews were conducted with selected students and English teachers through online mode. The qualitative data from focus- group interviews and informal interactions was used to understand the efficacy of digital tools in enhancing reading and writing skills. The pre-task, while task and post task focused on the sub-skills of reading like scanning for specific details, skimming for main ideas, vocabulary, establishing the context through the content of the reading text and sub-skills of writing like brainstorming, planning, sentence formation, structuring of paragraphs.

The questions in focus- group interviews can be broadly classified into two categories; firstly, to determine the motivational levels of students in using the digital tools and secondly, to understand the impact and efficacy of these tools in enhancing sub- skills of reading and writing. The findings show that students have been enthusiastic and active participants in using the digital tools. However, not all students were able to use the web- based resources with the same ease. Nevertheless, they were motivated to complete the tasks as they found these tools innovative, interesting and provided an opportunity for every student to actively participate in these activities. Most of the students agreed that reading aloud with Microsoft Edge helped them overcome the fear of pronunciation mistakes/ errors which in turn helped them focus on the content of the poem to get the main ideas (skimming). Similarly, cue prompter enabled them

to read the poem at their own pace, thus individualizing the experience of reading the poem for every student. The students considered themselves as active agents of learning process. Sixty percent of the students were able to identify figures of speech in the poem, able to predict the use of punctuation and capitalizations from the content of the poem. However, forty percent of them needed help from the teacher. On the other hand, tools like mentimeter, padlet and MyStory book enabled them to work collectively on sub-skills of comparative writing like brainstorming, structuring of paragraphs, sentence formation and choosing a frame of reference for presentation of the similarities and differences. While most of the students were able to complete the tasks, a few students found it difficult to organize their points in a logical sequence. The analysis of qualitative data from focus- group interviews has shown considerable improvement, at varying degrees, in students' attitude towards ESL learning and an enhancement reading and writing skills with the use of digital tools.

Qualitative data from Focus- Group Interviews

Broad classification of focus- group interview questions	Sub-skills of reading and writing	Digital tools and web resources	Student/ teacher responses
Did the use of digital tools/ web resources motivate you to complete reading and writing tasks?	Skimming, scanning, Brain storming, sentence formation, planning and structuring of paragraphs (cohesion)	Microsoft Edge Cue prompter Mentimeter Padlet MyStory book Hemingway app	80% of the students were motivated while 20% of them could not use the tools at ease. Active participation in class, students did not feel 'left out' Interactive classes
How do you think the tools enhanced your reading and writing skills?			Reading skills: Helped overcome the fear of pronunciation errors Students considered themselves to be active agents of their learning process Applied reading strategies like recall, predicting main idea of the poem, figures of speech Writing skills: Most of them could identify adjectives to describe their routine 70% were able to structure their thoughts (similarities and differences) in a coherent manner Learned from their peers while giving feedback

6. WEB BASED RESOURCES AND TOOLS TO ENHANCE WRITING AND READING SKILLS OF STUDENTS

6.1. Tools for Writing Skills

Hemingway app is an effective tool for checking the readability and style of writing and also functions as an effective feedback tool. It gives suggestions regarding voice, use of adverbs and simple phrases to enhance clarity of the text. Thus, the app makes students the agents of learning process by actively involving them in creating simple and understandable content. The app could be used as an effective feedback technique as students need not be "told" their mistakes as they participate in the process of learning from mistakes through constructive feedback. This

in-built feedback technique also helps overcome the time constraint in giving feedback. Conversely, *Telescopic text* is a simple web page that begins with a small idea or sentence and can be developed into a paragraph by clicking on the words highlighted in grey. It is a useful tool for creative writing and helps develop a vague idea into a full-fledged piece of writing. It is the best way to illustrate to students that great ideas are often born from simple sentences perfected with the craft of writing.

Write the World website is a global platform for young and enthusiastic writers with a vibrant community of young writers between 13-18 years from over 120 countries who collaborate, write, peer review and create a portfolio of published work to track their progress in writing. Similarly, *My Storybook* is an amazing free web based app that makes effective use of text and visuals and assists students in creating digital storybooks. A fun and exciting app that enables students to add characters, change background colors and type the text. Students embark on a creative journey that stimulates multiple intelligences like linguistic and visual.

Mentimeter could be used to generate ideas in the form of word clouds and an effective participatory way of brainstorming in remote learning. Words, thus generated could be used as cues for a writing activity while simultaneously involving students in synchronous learning at different stages of creating a piece of writing- from cue generation, and idea formulation to writing a full-fledged creative or critical piece of writing.

6.2. Tools for Reading Skills

Reading of poems and comprehension can be enhanced through web resources like *Microsoft Edge*, *Snap & Read universal*, *Newsela* and *Rewordify*. *Microsoft Edge* not only reads the text aloud with synchronized highlighting of electronic text, but also provides a range of voice options that are country specific like China, India, US, Australia, and so on. It is an effective and reliable app that provides students with an insight into different accents of English spoken all over the world while enabling students to read at their pace. Similarly, *Snap & Read universal* is an extension of Google chrome that reads text aloud using integrated text-to-speech with synchronized highlighting. *Microsoft Edge* and *Snap & Read universal* are useful tools for visually challenged students and essential tools for comparative study of different varieties of English accents in the world. On the other hand, the transformative aspect of web resources can be demonstrated using tools like *Rewordify*, a free online tool that improves students reading comprehension in many ways, and *Newsela*, a website that publishes articles on current events at different reading levels. *Rewordify* identifies difficult words from a text and replaces it with simpler words, thereby aids in students' better understanding of the text. Further, it creates a repertoire of vocabulary using the difficult words and provides students with a series of activities where they can improve vocabulary. Therefore, these web resources and tools not only possess the ability to enhance the writing and reading skills of Intermediate students but also represent the interactive, productive and transformational aspects of digital tools in online learning.

7. CONCLUSION

The paper suggests various types of digital tools that could be employed in the classroom by the teachers for the effective use of teaching /learning of reading and writing skills. Digital tools not only promote blended and online teaching but rather they serve as a means of productive, participatory and experiential learning that open up interaction with larger peer group. Obstacles like lack of interaction between teachers and students, time constraints for an interactive feedback and Question and Answer session and above all perception that English is not a core subject at Intermediate level can be overcome by using digital tools to stimulate

participation, creative thinking and self- learning among students. Advantages of using Web based resources and tools are manifold as they help blend synchronous and asynchronous learning and help overcome various constraints identified in the study.

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